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Stories of King Arthur



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"King Arthur had hardly spoken, before a white hart ran into the hall." (See page 19.)

STORIES OF KING ARTHUR

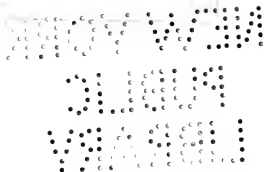
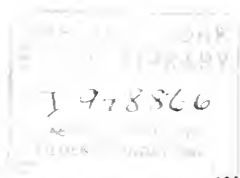
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STORIES OF KING ARTHUR

I.—OF ARTHUR'S BIRTH, AND HOW HE CAME TO HIS KINGDOM.

MANY, many years ago in Britain, in the days when this island was overrun by invading tribes—Picts, Scots, Angles, Saxons and others, all at war with one another—there lived a king named Uther Pendragon. He was a king of the Britons, the native people of the country who had retired before the invaders into the wild and mountainous parts of the west, particularly into Cornwall and Wales. Uther had made himself greatly feared by the other princes in the land, and had won many great battles; but there was so much discord among them all that they were never at peace, and consequently the country was in a very disturbed state.

One day, Uther heard of a beautiful princess in Cornwall named Igraine, and he determined to marry her. The lady, however, was not inclined to listen to him, whereupon the King fell ill through grief and disappointment. He took the matter so much to heart, indeed, that everyone thought he would die.

At this juncture, while he was moping in his castle, there came to him an old wizard, named Merlin. This Merlin was some hundreds of years old, and very wise and crafty. He was able to change his form by means of magic, and could make himself invisible whenever he wished. By his cunning he knew all that was passing in King Uther's mind, so when he appeared he said:

"Sir king, I know full well what is thy desire, and I promise to give it thee if thou wilt do my bidding."

Uther readily agreed to do whatever Merlin asked.

"It is this," said the old wizard. "When thou makest Igraine thy queen, there shall be a son born unto thee, and this son thou must give to me immediately after his birth."

The King promised that this should be done, and accordingly, through Merlin's power, he soon after won Igraine's love and wedded her.

In due time a little son was born, who was christened by the name of Arthur. Mindful of his promise, Uther gave orders for the child to be taken at once to the postern gate of the castle, where an old man was found to be waiting. This person was, of course, Merlin. The old wizard, who was able to look far ahead into the future, and knew the part that Arthur was destined to play in the saving of his country, carried away the child to a worthy knight called Sir Ector. Merlin gave out that he had found Arthur on the seashore, but he took the knight into his confidence, and begged him to bring up the child with his own son, Kay, which Sir Ector willingly promised to do.

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Some years afterwards King Uther died, but on his deathbed, by Merlin's counsel, he gave command to all his barons that they should look to his son, Arthur, as their king, and obey him loyally. None of the barons believed that Uther had a son, for Merlin had kept his secret well; so as soon as the King was dead and buried they began quarrelling among themselves as to who should occupy the throne. Each one wanted to be king, and for a long time there was nothing but fighting going on, to the great distress of the country.

When Arthur had grown up into a tall, lusty youth, Merlin knew that the time had come for him to present the Prince to the people. He accordingly went to the Archbishop and advised him to send messengers north and south, calling all the great men of the kingdom to London on Christmas Eve. For on the next day, he said, if they prayed and besought God earnestly, He would perhaps make known to them by a miracle who should be the rightful king of the realm.

The Archbishop carried out these instructions, and at Christmas time the great cathedral was filled with lords and knights kneeling at prayer. Early on the morning of Christmas Day, while the company was riding out after mass, they saw a wondrous sight. In the churchyard was a large square stone, white as marble, in the middle of which was an anvil of steel. But what attracted everybody's attention was a splendid sword which was stuck fast in the anvil, and round its hilt, written in letters of gold, was this inscription:

"Whoso pulleth out this sword from this stone and anvil is rightwise king born of all England."

Many of the lords and knights at once tried to pull out the sword, in order to prove that they were entitled to the kingship, but one and all failed. Then the Archbishop said :

"The man to whom this sword belongs is not here among us, but I doubt not that God will make him known in good time. And this is my counsel ; that we place ten knights in charge of this sword and stone until he who is to be our king shall appear."

This was done, and furthermore it was announced that a great tournament* was to be held in London at Easter, at which each knight could again try his skill with sword and lance, and prove if this adventure were for him.

Among those who at Eastertide rode into the city to join in the jousting† were Sir Ector, Sir Kay, who had but recently been made a knight, and his foster-brother Arthur. On the day when the tournament opened, Sir Kay suddenly discovered that he had brought no sword with him. He was in great dismay, for the heralds were sounding their trumpets ; but Arthur said :

"Never mind, Kay, I will ride home and fetch your sword. I shall be back before the lists begin."

So away went young Arthur, as fast as his horse could speed ; but on arriving at Sir Ector's castle he found it shut up and deserted, for everyone was at the tournament. He was vexed

* A martial sport or combat of olden times at which knights on horseback exhibited their courage and skill in arms.

† An encounter with spears between two knights on horseback.

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to think that Sir Kay should have to go without a sword, and was about to return to the others, when suddenly he bethought himself of the wonderful sword in the cathedral churchyard.

"I will ride thither and get that one for Kay," said Arthur; and springing on his horse again he set off for the cathedral.

When he rode into the churchyard he found, to his delight, that it was deserted, for all the guards, like everybody else, had gone off to the tournament. Having tied up his horse to the stile, Arthur ran across to the golden-lettered sword, and with one pull drew it easily out of the stone. Without thinking of what a marvel he had accomplished, the youth hastened after his foster-brother and presented him with the sword.

Sir Kay recognised it at once as the sword from the churchyard, and taking it to his father he said :

"Lo, here is the sword of the stone; wherefore I must be king of this land!"

Sir Ector took the two youths into the cathedral with him and made his son tell him how the weapon came into his possession, whereat Sir Kay related how Arthur had ridden off and procured it. Hearing this, Sir Ector fell on his knee before Arthur and did homage to him, hailing him as king. Sir Kay, at his bidding, also did the same.

To make certain that Arthur was the one for whom the sword was destined, Sir Ector took them once again into the churchyard, where he put the sword back into the anvil. The good knight and Sir Kay then tried several times to draw it out

but in vain; the weapon held fast. Arthur then took hold of the handle, and without any effort pulled out the sword. Sir Ector now knew beyond all doubt that Arthur was the rightful king of England, and once more kneeling before him, he told the young Prince the whole story of his birth. Arthur was sorry to learn that Sir Ector was not his real father, for the good knight and his wife had been very kind to him, but he promised that if he were indeed made king he would reward them for their services. Sir Kay, he said, he would make seneschal* of all his land.

The next thing to be done was to tell the Archbishop of all that had happened, and very astonished was he at Sir Ector's tale. In due course, when Twelfth Day came, all the barons and knights, with a large number of the common people, assembled before the stone. One after another they tried again to pull out the sword from the anvil, but one and all they again failed. Then Arthur stepped forward, and grasping the sword drew it forth as easily as he had done before.

The barons were highly indignant at such a boy as Arthur achieving the task, but the common people knelt before him and shouted: "Arthur is our king; it is the will of God."

The Archbishop, too, was willing to accept Arthur as the rightful sovereign, and he would have crowned the Prince then and there had not the lords insisted on the ceremony being put off for a season. A new trial was accordingly made at Candlemas, and another at the Feast of Pentecost; but the result was the same; none but Arthur

* A steward.

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could withdraw the sword, and at last they were obliged to acknowledge his right.

The young Prince was therefore duly crowned by the Archbishop amid the shouts of the people. He swore faithfully before them all to rule the country wisely and well, and to right the many wrongs that remained to be redressed. We know how well he kept his vow, with the aid of the knights of his famous Round Table; for the story of his deeds has been preserved for us by the old chroniclers and by tradition. In the following chapters we shall read of some of his principal knights, and see how they fared in their adventures while upholding the chivalry of King Arthur's court.

II.—OF KING ARTHUR'S MARRIAGE, AND HOW SIR TOR PROVED HIMSELF A WORTHY KNIGHT.

WHEN Arthur was king in Britain, and was ruling the country wisely and well, Merlin became his most trusted counsellor. He was a very old and very wise man, as I have said; how old no one exactly knew, but there was no doubt as to his wisdom, for through his cunning and magic, King Arthur was brought safely through many perils, and had overcome the other kings and lords who made war against him. When, therefore, Arthur thought about choosing a queen to sit upon his throne, it was Merlin whom he first consulted on the matter.

Merlin fully agreed that it would be a good thing for Arthur to take a wife, and asked him if there were any lady he loved more than another.

"Yes," said King Arthur; "I love Guinevere, the beautiful daughter of King Leodegraunce of Cameliard, for she is the fairest lady that I know."

On hearing this, Merlin said he would go to King Leodegraunce, and tell him of Arthur's desire. Now, this king had in his keeping the famous Round Table, which Uther Pendragon, Arthur's father, had once possessed. When he received Merlin's message he was glad to think that such a noble and mighty prince as Arthur had sued for his daughter's hand, and he cast about in his mind how

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to make a fitting present to Arthur in token of his good-will. As Arthur had no need of more lands or money, Leodegraunce was puzzled as to what to send, until he bethought himself of the Round Table. So when Merlin returned with King Leodegraunce's consent, he also took with him the famous table, together with a hundred knights. The table had seats for a hundred and fifty in all, but the number was not yet complete.

As you may imagine, there was great rejoicing in Arthur's kingdom over the success of the mission, and the King himself was highly pleased with the present Leodegraunce had sent him. He now gave orders that preparations for the wedding and coronation should be begun at once, and commanded Merlin to seek out fifty more knights of prowess in order to fill all the table's seats, or "sieges," as the old chronicles style them.

Merlin sought far and wide, but he could only find twenty-eight knights who were worthy, and these were accordingly allotted places.

"You will fill the other sieges in good time," he said to Arthur, "for there are many who will yet prove themselves good knights and true, and will do great deeds."

One of the seats at the Round Table was destined to be filled very shortly. One morning there came a poor man into the King's court, and with him there was a fair youth, riding on a lean and poor-looking horse. When he presented himself before Arthur, the peasant said:

"O King, I have been told that at this time of your marriage you would give any man the gift that he might ask, if it were in reason. There-

fore, I beseech you to make my son here one of your knights."

"You ask a bold thing, indeed," said Arthur, though he was not a little pleased with the youth's appearance. "What is your name, and who are you?"

Then the peasant answered that he was one Aries, a cowherd, and that he had thirteen other sons who were all at work in the fields and elsewhere, but this son, Tor, would do nothing but think of fighting, and practise with arms all day long, and beg his father to make him a knight, so that he might ride away to the wars.

King Arthur, who liked the lad the more he looked upon him, decided to grant his desire; and having taken Tor's sword he smote him lightly with it on the shoulder and created him a knight. He further promised him that he should belong to the Round Table if he showed himself worthy.

Now wise old Merlin had been standing by the King's side during this scene, and when Arthur appealed to him to know what kind of a knight Sir Tor would make, Merlin replied:

"He ought to be a very noble knight, for he comes of as good blood as any in your company. He is a king's son."

"How mean you?" asked Arthur in some bewilderment.

"I mean," said Merlin, "that Sir Tor is the son of none other than King Pellinore, and that the cowherd's wife found him and brought him up."

Aries' wife was immediately sent for, and on being questioned she confessed that the boy was a

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foundling and not their own son, at which Arthur was secretly glad.

The next day King Pellinore himself came to the court and learnt of the strange manner in which his long-lost son had been found. Tor had grown into a fine, handsome, well-built youth, and Pellinore was proud to acknowledge him.

In due course King Arthur was married, and there was great feasting and merry-making among his people. On the wedding-day, while all the King's knights were seated at the Round Table, in the great hall of the Palace, Merlin came in and bade them sit still, for something very marvellous was about to happen. He had hardly spoken, before a white hart* ran into the hall, followed by a number of dogs. The frightened animal ran round the table, in and out amongst the knights, who remembered Merlin's injunction and kept still.

Suddenly one of the dogs bit the hart, and the creature made a great leap that overthrew one of the knights. The latter at once rose up and, taking the dog in his arms, strode out of the hall, mounted upon his horse, and rode away. A little afterwards a lady, riding a white palfrey,† entered the hall and begged the King with many tears to restore her dog to her; but while she was speaking a tall knight in armour rode in and carried her away on his horse.

King Arthur was not sorry to see the last of her, for such an interruption to the festivities was unseemly. Merlin, however, declared that the adventure was more important than Arthur thought, and when the clamour had subsided he said:

* A stag, or male deer.

† A small riding horse.

"You must call Sir Gawaine (another new knight), for it is he who must bring the white hart back again; and you must call Sir Tor, for he must ride after the knight with the dog and bring that back also."

To King Pellinore he decreed the quest of the knight who had carried off the lady; and all the three, said Merlin, would do wondrous deeds ere they met again at Arthur's court.

How Sir Gawaine and King Pellinore set out on their quests, and what marvellous adventures they had, cannot be set down here; suffice it to say that they fulfilled Merlin's predictions. It is with Sir Tor that we will concern ourselves.

Immediately on receiving the King's command, the young knight sprang upon his horse (an old courser, which his father, King Pellinore, presented to him), and rode out on to the broad highway, greatly wondering as to what fortune had in store for him. He had not gone far on his journey before he met a dwarf who barred his way.

"Thou canst not pass," cried this individual, "unless thou wilt joust* with yonder knights."

As he spoke, he pointed to where two pavilions stood, with shields hung outside them, and several long spears near by.

Sir Tor was in no mood for wasting time, and he was about to press on when the dwarf blew upon a horn, and a knight in armour dashed out of one of the pavilions. The youth met his onslaught boldly, and succeeded in unhorsing his adversary at the first blow. The second knight Sir Tor served in like manner, and on their begging for mercy he

* See second footnote on page 12.

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bade them take their way to Arthur's court at Camelot, and await his return.

The dwarf now prayed Sir Tor to take him into his service, and having secured a horse he followed his new master.

In time they came to a forest, where, in a pavilion, Sir Tor found the dog of which he was in quest. There was a lady asleep there also, and when she awoke on hearing the noise she warned the youth that he would come to harm if he persisted in taking the dog away. But Sir Tor laughed her words to scorn, declaring that he would take whatever adventure might befall him. So he and the dwarf turned back with their prize towards Camelot.

They had gone some distance when they heard a knight riding furiously after them, and calling to them to stop. This knight now bade Sir Tor yield up the dog to him, but Sir Tor refused. The two then took their shields and spears, and fell fiercely upon each other. For hours they fought hard with their spears, and, when they were on foot, with their swords. Sir Tor was wounded in many places and well-nigh exhausted, but he was determined not to give in, and eventually he brought his adversary to the ground.

While the fallen knight, who was named Sir Abelleus, lay at his feet, a lady rode up to Sir Tor and besought him to kill the other knight, "for," she said, "he is a most wicked knight, and a murderer, and he deserves no mercy." Learning that Sir Abelleus had foully killed this damsel's brother, Sir Tor granted her request, and with one stroke smote off the treacherous knight's head.

After resting for the night at the lady's castle, where she and her husband feasted him royally, Sir Tor proceeded on his way, and three days later arrived at Camelot. King Arthur and Queen Guinevere were glad indeed to see him safely returned, and when he had recounted the tale of his adventures they declared that he had borne himself most gallantly.

In reward for his prowess King Arthur bestowed an earldom on Sir Tor, together with a fine estate.

But Merlin, who could look into the future, said that these deeds were nothing to what Sir Tor would do later on, and that he would become as noble and gentle and courteous a knight as any in the land. All of which, of course, came true.

III.—OF SIR BEAUMAINS AND HIS QUEST.

It was the time of Pentecost, and King Arthur was holding his court in Wales. Just before noon one day, as the King was going into the banquet prepared for him, a messenger entered the hall and announced that a strange party was approaching. There were three men on horseback, he said, accompanied by a dwarf. A little later the newcomers made their entrance, two of them being roughly dressed serving men, while the third was a tall, broad-shouldered youth of striking appearance, although somewhat plainly clad.

Having made his obeisance to the King, the young man exclaimed :—

“King Arthur, I am come hither to claim three gifts of you. The first I will ask now, but the other two I will ask a year hence, when you again hold your feast.”

Arthur smiled on him graciously, and bade him proceed.

“I will ask but this, O King,” continued the youth; “that you will grant me food and drink and lodging here for the next twelvemonth.”

“That is but a small thing to ask,” replied the King; “is there nothing better you desire? Come, ask what you will, for I think you are not what your dress would proclaim, but that you come of good family. What is your name, pray?”

To this the youth answered that he could not tell his name yet, and that he desired nothing more than to live at the King's court, as he had said, and receive meat and drink for a twelve-month.

King Arthur was curious to know more about this lusty youth, whose well-knit figure pleased him greatly, but as the other would say nothing further he called Sir Kay, his seneschal, and bade him treat the lad well.

Sir Kay cast a disdainful look upon his new charge, and sniffed contemptuously. "Things have come to a pretty pass, indeed," he said, "when any peasant's son who likes to come to court can have his lodging free, and feed at the King's expense the year round!"

"But he may be a great lord's son, for all you know," said some of the knights present. "Even King Arthur suspects him of being of noble birth."

"Fiddlesticks!" cried Sir Kay angrily. "He is a country boor, I promise you. Had he been aught else he would have begged for horse, and armour, and a stout lance, and a knightly quest. But this great clown—this Beaumains (Fair Hands) as we will call him—will have naught but eating and drinking, so please you! And enough of that he shall have, for he shall take his fill in the kitchen with the others, and stuff himself as fat as any pig!"

So Beaumains was given a seat among the King's serving men and kitchen boys, and there he lived for twelve months, as Arthur had promised him. Every day he performed the same menial

Of Sir Beaumains and His Quest 25

tasks as his fellows, taking Sir Kay's mocks and jeers in the best of good humours. But one thing could draw him from his work, and that was a jousting between any of the knights of the court. Then Beaumains would hie himself to the lists and watch eagerly how the knights bore themselves with lance and sword. And whenever there were any bouts of arms and feats of strength in which he might join, he was one of the foremost; and so strong was he that none of his fellows could beat him.

At the end of the year there came to King Arthur's court a damsel who demanded redress for her mistress's wrongs. Arthur was always ready to see justice done in his kingdom, and no one ever appealed to him in vain.

"My mistress," said the damsel, "is in great peril, and prays your help. She is kept prisoner by a tyrant knight in a castle far away. Ask me not her name now, O King, for I may not tell it; but I pray you send one of your noble knights to set her free."

Now when Arthur heard her say that she might not disclose her mistress's name, he declared that none of his knights should go on such a quest unless of his own free will. The King looked round the assembled court, but no knight proffered his services. He was about to speak again, when Beaumains suddenly thrust himself forward and knelt at Arthur's feet.

"A boon, Sir King!" he cried. "A boon. For twelve months have I sat at your table, and now is the time for me to ask the other two gifts you promised me."

"Say on," commanded the King.

"Well, then," continued Beaumains, "I beg you to grant me this adventure, and let me ride with this damsel to rescue her mistress. And secondly, grant that Sir Lancelot may dub me knight, for I would receive knighthood from none other save thyself, O King."

"'Tis granted," cried Arthur; "it shall be thy quest, boy, and may God send thee a safe ending to it."

All present rejoiced greatly at Beaumains' good fortune, for the youth was well liked; all that is, except the damsel herself, who now turned angrily upon the King.

"What!" she cried; "can I have no knight errant but one of thy kitchen boys? Then will I have none at all!" And so saying she called for her palfrey and rode away.

It was not long ere Beaumains was ready to follow her, for the same dwarf who had attended him before now appeared with a fine horse and a suit of armour. And so, well equipped, save for lance and shield, he spurred after the damsel.

Sir Kay, still scornful of his kitchen-boy's prowess, now got upon his horse and rode after Beaumains, thinking to humble his pride.

"I will show you," he said to Sir Lancelot and the other knights, "how this braggart shall be taught his place."

When Beaumains heard the seneschal thundering along behind him he turned, and with his sword drawn charged full tilt at Sir Kay. The latter went down at the first shock and lay stunned, for the youth had dealt him a terrible blow upon

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his helm. Then Beaumains took the seneschal's shield and spear, and, arming himself with them, rode once more after the damsel.

Following close upon Sir Kay came Sir Lancelot who, calling out to Beaumains, bade him stop.

"Will you joust with me, Sir Lancelot?" asked the youth joyfully.

"That I will," replied the knight, and thereupon they made ready for the fray.

At the first onset both went down together, and fighting on foot with their swords they battled fiercely for a long time. Sir Lancelot was surprised to find what a formidable adversary Beaumains proved to be, for he was one of the foremost of the Round Table knights, and very few could withstand him in the field. At last Sir Lancelot cried: "Beaumains, I pray you fight not so strongly. We have no quarrel, and I am fain to rest awhile."

So the youth ceased fighting, and the two talked together. When Sir Lancelot pressed him, Beaumains acknowledged that he was truly of noble birth, and that he was Sir Gareth, the son of the King of Orkney. His mother, he said, had sent him to Arthur's court well equipped with knightly gear, but he had determined that what knighthood he won should be through his prowess alone, and not because of his high rank. And thus he had disguised himself as we know. Sir Lancelot gladly knighted the youth on hearing his story, for he felt assured that Beaumains was destined to do great deeds. Then, leaving him, he hastened back to Arthur's court.

On overtaking the damsel, who had hardly

waited to see the result of the combat, Beaumains found himself greeted with anything but welcome words.

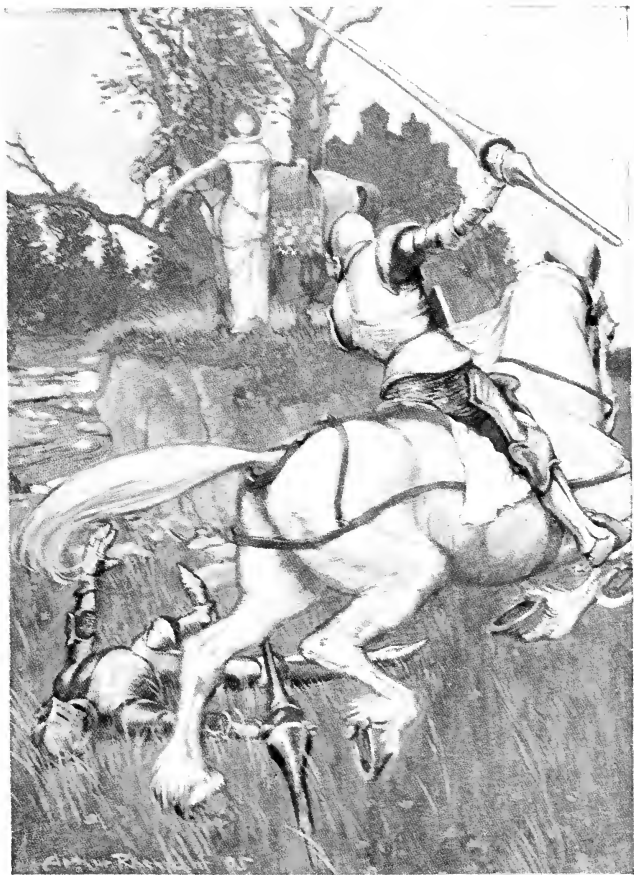
"Faugh!" said she, drawing away from him; "has this scullion knave come back to me?" And vowing that his clothes smelt of the kitchen she ordered him to begone, for he should not ride with her.

Still Beaumains, for all that she laughed and scoffed at him, refused to abandon the quest, and they rode on together. On the way the youth overcame two knights who barred his passage at a ford in a river, and slew them; but the damsel declared that he had killed them by mischance, and said that there was an adventure before him that she warranted would make him flinch.

"Let that be as it may be," returned the youth; "I will not give up this quest until I have rescued your mistress. And I care not who those doughty knights be who guard her so well."

It was not many hours later before they came to a forest wherein a tall black knight seated on a black charger met their view. All this knight's trappings, and even his shield and spear, were in black. At sight of him Beaumains couched his lance and pulled down the vizor of his helm. Presently the other knight bore down upon him, and with a crash as of thunder they dashed together. For a full hour or more they fought, and in the end Beaumains struck the other so sorely that the Black Knight fell from his horse and died.

Despite this deed the damsel still mocked her companion, declaring that chance alone had



"This knight he served as he had done the other."

Of Sir Beaumains and His Quest 29

favoured him, and that he need not hope to escape from the knight's two brothers, whom he had yet to meet. To all of which the youth answered nothing, save to say that he was ready for whatever fortune might send him.

The second foe whom Beaumains encountered was a knight who was apparelled all in green. This knight he served as he had done the other, but sparing his life at the damsel's request. After this Beaumains thought she would soften towards him, but, nevertheless, she continued to jeer at him and call him "foul kitchen-boy," as before.

Riding on their way, they came in time to where the third of the brethren—he who was known as the Red Knight—was awaiting him. At a given signal the two rushed together and shivered their lances on each other's shields. Then, fighting on foot, they fell to fiercely with their swords, until finally the Red Knight was overthrown and lay helpless on the ground. Beaumains now made ready to slay him, too, for he resolved that the damsel should again entreat him to show mercy. This at length she did, whereupon he bade the Red Knight rise and betake himself with his brother the Green Knight to Arthur's court, there to tell how they had been worsted and overthrown.

Yet another doughty adversary, Sir Persant of Inde, or the Blue Knight, had Beaumains to overcome, and only now, on his proving himself the victor once more, did the damsel leave off reviling him and begin to feel ashamed of her words. But Beaumains bore her no malice and forgave her readily. And to Sir Persant and the damsel, whose name was Lynette, he revealed his true name,

much to their astonishment, for they had all along deemed him to be of lowly birth.

When the Lady Lyonors, who was being held captive in the castle, was informed of the champion who was coming to release her, she sent word to her sister Lynette (for such the damsel was) to see to Beaumains' wants, and prepare him for the last battle that was before him. For he had yet to meet another famous Red Knight, who was stronger far than any of the others.

In due course Beaumains and the damsel arrived at the castle, and here the Red Knight rode out to do battle with him. Of all those whom the youth had encountered, this knight was indeed the fiercest, and he had hard work to contend against the other's terrible blows. Eventually, however, he conquered, and the Red Knight had to sue for mercy.

So Beaumains, or Sir Gareth, as he should be rightly called, achieved his quest, and released Lynette's sister from her prison. Being himself sorely wounded, he remained some time in the castle, where he was nursed by the Lady Lyonors and ere long won her love. When they returned together to Arthur's Court never was such a noble wedding as that of Sir Gareth and his lady. And of all, none was so pleased at the happy termination of the adventure as King Arthur, for he ever loved to see a man prove himself a worthy and valiant knight.

IV.—OF SIR TRISTRAM OF LYONESSE AND LA BELLE YSOLDE.

OF all the knights of King Arthur's noble brotherhood, there were very few who won greater renown than Sir Tristram. He was the son of the King of Lyonesse, and, his mother having died while he was still a baby, he was brought up in a stepmother's care. Now, this stepmother bore Tristram no love because he was heir to his father's kingdom, and her own children could not inherit it while he lived. She therefore resolved to get rid of him by some means or other, and finally fixed upon poison as being the safest method.

Her first attempt failed, for the Queen's own son himself found the deadly cup where she had placed it and, drinking of it, died. This made her still more bent on killing Tristram, and she again placed a cup of poisoned wine in his way. As luck would have it, this time it was the King who first happened upon it. He had just returned from a day's hunting and, being hot and thirsty, he took up the cup to drink off the cooling wine. At this moment the Queen, who had been watching for Tristram to appear, caught sight of the King. Darting from her hiding-place, she struck the cup from his grasp.

"What means this?" asked the King in surprised tones.

The guilty Queen could say nothing. Words failed her, and she stood before him with reddened downcast face.

Stories of King Arthur

The King now recalled to mind the strange death of his son, and understanding that something was amiss with the wine-cup he said sternly:

“Wife of mine though thou art, thou shalt tell me if thou hast played me false! What means this sudden confusion and silence on thy part? What hast thou done to this wine?”

The Queen endeavoured to put him off and make her escape, but the King held her fast. Then, drawing his sword, he threatened her with instant death if she would not at once confess the truth. At this she fell upon her knees and sobbed out how she had laid a trap for young Tristram, meaning to kill him and so secure the inheritance for her own children.

The King heard her to the end with a set, grim face. Then he ordered her to retire to her apartments, where he put a guard over her that she might not do any further mischief. In the morning he called a council of his chief barons, and, laying the case before them, asked what should be done. They debated for some time, and at last, it having been decided that the Queen should die, they condemned her to be burnt.

Preparations for the carrying out of the Queen's sentence were forthwith begun, a large pile of wood being erected in the Palace courtyard. Young Tristram was soon told of what was going on, and in great concern he hastened to the King's chamber. There, kneeling before his father, he begged to be granted a boon.

“’Tis well,” said the King; “speak, my son, and I will grant thy request.”

"I ask for nothing but the life of the Queen, my stepmother," answered the boy. Then, seeing his father turn his head away with an angry frown, he added: "I will not rise till thou hast granted what thou promised."

"But the Queen sought to kill thee, and she bears thee only ill-will. Thou shouldst be glad that she is to die," said the King.

To this Tristram made answer that he forgave her readily for her evil intentions towards him, as he hoped God would forgive her, and he begged so hard that the King would relent that the latter at length gave way and granted his request. Tristram sprang joyfully to his feet, and hastening out to the courtyard, where the unhappy Queen was being prepared for execution, he set her free and led her back into the Palace.

In due time the King himself forgave her, but fearing that her old hatred for Tristram might yet assert itself, he resolved to send the boy away. Tristram was accordingly despatched into France in the charge of a gentleman who was well fitted to teach him all that should become a young knight. And he made such good progress that he became an adept at hunting and feats of arms, in addition to learning many musical instruments and perfecting himself in other arts. When he returned home he had grown into a fine young man, big and strong, and the King, his father, was justly proud of him. His stepmother, too, ever since he had saved her from such a dreadful fate, had come to love him as her own son, and now she made more of him than ever.

So matters went on until one day there came a

message from the King of Ireland to King Mark of Cornwall (Tristram's uncle), demanding payment of a certain feudal right which had been owing for some years past. On King Mark's refusing to accede to this demand, the Irish king sent one of his best knights, Sir Marhaus by name, to do battle on his behalf. Sir Marhaus accordingly took ship to Cornwall, and challenged King Mark to send a champion to meet him, it being agreed that the result of the fight should settle the point at issue.

This knight, Sir Marhaus, was so famous a fighter that no one could be found in Cornwall bold enough to encounter him, and Sir Marhaus waited in vain for a champion to oppose him. At last news of the situation came to Lyonesse, and to Tristram's ears. The youth now went to the King, his father, and prayed for leave to ride to his uncle and offer him his services.

As you may imagine, the old King was very loth to let his son go, knowing well what a doughty knight Sir Marhaus was. But the youth would give him no rest until he had consented, and eventually Tristram was equipped in a manner befitting his rank, and sent on his way to King Mark's court.

When the youth presented himself and declared his errand, King Mark welcomed him warmly, though he feared greatly (as well he might) for the result of the battle. Sir Marhaus soon heard that a knight had come forward, and gladly made himself ready. On his demanding to know who the champion was, Tristram revealed his identity, and King Mark was more rejoiced than before

to learn that it was his nephew who had come to defend his cause.

On the appointed day, Sir Tristram, who had by this time been knighted, betook himself to the island where Sir Marhaus was awaiting him. Here he armed himself, bidding his servant go back to the ship, and not to venture near him unless he were overcome or killed. Then he and Sir Marhaus set their spears in rest and dashed fiercely against each other.

The shock was so great that both were unhorsed, Sir Tristram receiving a severe wound in his side. Sir Marhaus was unhurt, and, leaping to his feet, he drew his great sword. Sir Tristram had drawn his also, and the two fell to fighting hand to hand, the blows ringing on their shields like thunderclaps. For hours they fought thus, neither gaining the advantage, while the supporters of the champions watched them anxiously from the ships near by. Although Tristram's wound hurt him sorely, he did not tire quite so easily as his adversary. Finding at last that Sir Marhaus showed signs of weakening, he redoubled his efforts, and very soon, with a mighty stroke, cleft the Irish knight's helm, the point of his sword sticking in the other's head and breaking off.

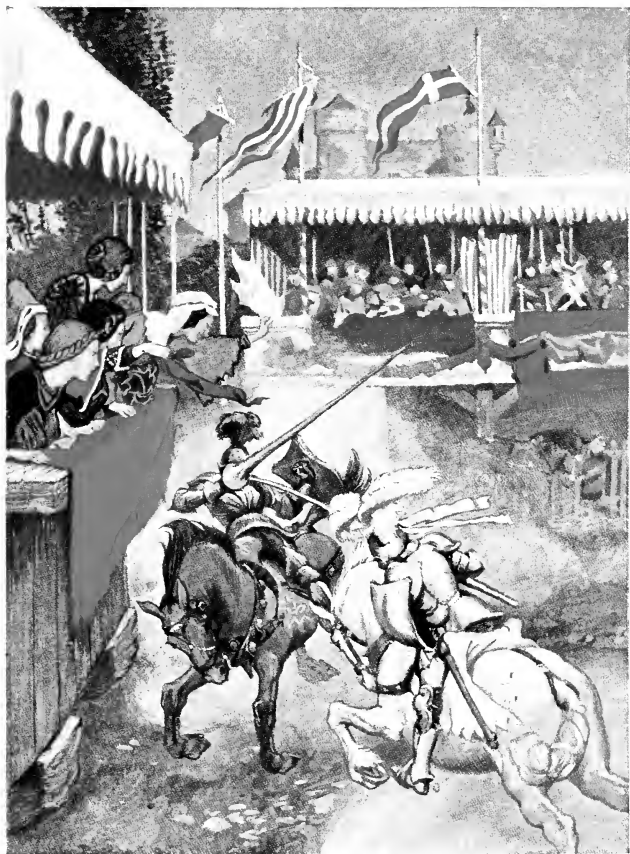
Sir Marhaus fell groaning to the ground; then, struggling to his feet, he threw away his sword and shield, and ran off as fast as he could to his ship. In vain did Tristram call after him to end the combat; the knight would not turn back. So the youth returned to King Mark, bearing the arms of Sir Marhaus in token of his victory.

The wound which Sir Tristram had received

proved to be more troublesome than was anticipated, for Sir Marhaus's spear—contrary to all the rules of chivalry—had been envenomed, and the youth lay in great danger for his life. There was no surgeon or doctor in the land who could cure him, but a wise woman who appeared before the King declared that Tristram could only be made well in the land whence the venom came. King Mark thereupon procured a vessel, and sent the young knight off to Ireland with his faithful squire. Little did he think of how this journey was to end.

On arriving in the green isle Tristram thought it well to hide his real name, seeing that he was in Sir Marhaus's country, and that some of the latter's kinsmen might seek to revenge themselves upon him, for Sir Marhaus had not returned home many weeks before he died. He, therefore, let himself be known as "Tramtrist," turning his own name round, and appeared before the King in the guise of a harper. So pleased was the King with the newcomer's music, that he showed him great favour, and placed him in the care of his daughter, the beautiful Ysolde, who was famous throughout Ireland for her skill in surgery. It was not long ere the princess had cured Tristram of his wound, and it was not long, also, ere the youth himself had fallen madly in love with his fair physician.

His rival for the hand of La Belle Ysolde, as the King's daughter was called, was one Sir Palamides, the Saracen. This knight stood high in the King's esteem, but Ysolde herself loved Tristram far better.



"Tristram smiting him clean off his horse."

One day the King decreed that a great tournament should be held, the victorious knight to be the winner of the fair lady's hand, in whose honour the jousts were held. Many knights of fame entered the lists, but one and all went down before Sir Palamides' mighty blows, and he remained unbeaten. When the King enquired of Sir Tristram why he did not joust, the latter replied that he had but recently recovered from his wound. At the desire of La Belle Ysolde, however, who was beginning to suspect that "Tramtrist" was something more than he purported to be, he consented to try his fortune in the lists.

When Sir Palamides, the Saracen, rode out the next day challenging all who cared to meet him, Sir Tristram suddenly made his appearance, clad in white armour and riding on a milk-white charger.

None knew who he was except La Belle Ysolde and his squire, who was bound to secrecy, and many were the conjectures about the "White Knight." In the fray Sir Palamides was soon worsted, Tristram smiting him clean off his horse.

The Saracen knight, ashamed at having been so humbled after his loud boasting, tried to retire unseen from the field, but Tristram pursued him, and compelled him to fight again. They fought now with their swords, and here, too, Tristram proved himself stronger than the other, so that Sir Palamides was forced to yield himself.

Of course, the secret of "Tramtrist's" adventure could not be long kept, and the King and Queen were well pleased to find him a man of such prowess. At this juncture, however, the Queen

discovered that the stranger knight was none other than he who had slain Marhaus, the champion of Ireland; for she had kept the broken sword-point that had been left in the dead knight's head, and found that Tristram's own weapon lacked such a piece.

In great fury she was now bent on killing Sir Tristram unawares, but La Belle Ysolde restrained her, and they consulted with the King as to what should be done. In this dilemma the King sought Sir Tristram, and, telling him of their startling discovery, pressed him for his real name. The young knight readily revealed his rank. He then told how he had come to masquerade under the name of "Tramtrist," and further declared his love for the beautiful Ysolde.

The King was loth indeed to part with his guest, but the anger of the Queen was strong against Sir Tristram, besides which the numerous kinsmen of Sir Marhaus might have demanded the young knight's death. So he gave permission for Tristram to return home, which the latter did after taking leave of Ysolde and avowing himself to be always her true knight. On her side, the princess promised that she would never marry but by his consent, and they exchanged rings, as true lovers always did in those old days. And so, soon afterwards, Tristram found himself speeding over the sea once more to his uncle, King Mark, in Cornwall.

Of the after-career of Sir Tristram there is not room here to speak, but those who read the chronicles which tell of all his wonderful fights and adventures will know how he and La Belle

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Ysolde loved each other to the end of their days, although they were destined never to marry. Which is why Sir Tristram was ever known as "the Love-lorn."

V.—OF BALIN AND BALAN, AND THE DOLOROUS STROKE.

AMONG the many smaller kings in Britain who were jealous of Arthur's power and sought to overthrow him was King Ryons of North Wales. This Ryons had gathered many barons together to serve him, and had made himself so feared in the country round about his own territory, that he thought himself to be stronger than he actually was. One day he sent a herald to King Arthur, who was holding a festival at Camelot, with this insolent message :

“Sir King, my master sends thee fair greeting, and he bids me tell thee that he hath overcome eleven kings, who, in token of homage, have given him their beards, wherewith he hath trimmed a mantle. He yet lacks one, however, to make it complete, and he commands thee to send him thy beard with all haste, or else he will come upon thee with his host, and slay thee and all thy people.”

Arthur was highly indignant at such an insulting message, but he restrained his anger, and bade the herald return to King Ryons, saying:

“A more shameful message was never delivered, I trow, and I pray thee tell thy master this. My beard is full young to make a trimming of, and I

owe him no homage; but ere long he shall do homage to me on both his knees, or else he shall lose his head."

Many of Arthur's knights would have revenged Ryons's insult on the person of his herald had not the King stayed their hands, and given the messenger safe conduct from the court.

After some time Ryons carried out his threat by invading Arthur's kingdom and putting many people to death. On hearing this, the King called a council of all his principal lords and knights, summoning them to Camelot. While he was debating with them as to what should be done, a damsel one morning entered the castle hall to seek audience of him. She came, she said, from the Lady of the Lake, and was on a mission of great importance. Suddenly letting her mantle fall, she showed that she wore a noble sword by her side.

"Why dost thou wear this?" asked King Arthur. "It were more suited to a man than to a fair lady like thee."

"It is of this sword that I am come to speak to thee," answered the damsel. "That I am girt with it is to my sorrow, for I may not be delivered of it but by a good knight who is both brave and pure in heart, one without villainy or treachery. Only such as he can pull this sword from its scabbard. I have been to King Ryons's court in Wales, for there were many good knights there, I learned, yet was there none who could help me. Now am I come to thee, Sir Arthur, trusting that here will be found one who will deliver me from this sword."

When she had finished speaking, the King first tried to pull out the sword from its sheath, not so much because he deemed himself the best knight there present, but to set his lords the example. Neither he, however, nor any of those who followed after him could in any way move it, and the damsel was in greater distress than ever. Very sadly she prepared to take her departure.

Now among the crowd of knights and men-at-arms in the hall, who were watching the scene, was a poor knight of Northumberland named Balin le Savage. He had been in prison for some time past for having killed a man, but had just been set free. While the other knights vainly endeavoured to draw the damsel's sword, he kept aloof, though he longed to press forward and try his own hand. He was so meanly clad in comparison with the richly dressed throng around him that he felt somewhat ashamed to make himself known, but just as she was going out of the door, he plucked up courage and called out:

"Fair damsel, I pray thee in courtesy to let me make the attempt as these lords have done. Poor though I may appear, yet methinks I am as good a knight as any here, and may prove myself such."

The damsel, though she doubted much whether he would succeed where so many had failed, allowed him to put his hand to the sword, whereupon, to everyone's surprise, Balin easily drew it out. A great shout went up from all present.

"Thou art indeed a good knight, and the best that ever I have found," said the damsel. "I thank thee, sir knight, for thy kind office, and now, I pray thee, return me the sword."

"Not so," answered Balin, "this is as good a sword as I have seen, and I will keep it."

"Keep it an thou wilt," said the other, "but thou wert wise not to do so." And then she told him how by that sword he should kill the best friend that he had, and how it should be his own destruction. Nevertheless, Balin vowed he would not part with it, but would take whatever adventure might come.

After the damsel had gone, Balin sent for his horse and armour, for he intended now to set out to meet and kill King Ryons, and so restore himself to Arthur's favour. As he was about to depart, however, there came another visitor to the court, none other than the Lady of the Lake herself. It was this lady who had given King Arthur his famous sword Excalibur, in return for which he had at the time promised to grant her a boon. She now knelt before him, and reminded him of his promise.

"Ask what thou wilt," said the King, "and if it lies in my power to give it thee I will not say nay."

Then the Lady of the Lake, who was really a wicked sorceress, begged for either the head of the damsel who had just brought the sword to the court or that of the knight who had become possessed of it, declaring that Balin had slain her brother, while the damsel had caused her father's death. But King Arthur would not grant her what she asked, though she begged hard, and at last she went away.

As she was passing out of the hall, Balin met her, and, recognising her for the witch-woman who,

among many evil deeds, had cruelly killed his mother, he quickly drew his sword and smote off her head. When this was told to the King he was very angry with Balin, and although the latter recounted all the wicked things that the Lady of the Lake had done, he would not forgive him, but ordered him to leave the court at once. Very sad at heart, in that he had offended Arthur, Balin mounted his horse and rode away from Camelot.

Some days afterwards, while Balin was passing through a great forest, he beheld a knight riding towards him, and to his joy recognised in the stranger his own brother Balan. When the latter had heard of all Balin's adventures, he said that he would join him. The two, therefore, went on their way together, hoping that it would not be long before they encountered King Ryons.

The two knights were nearer to the end of their quest than they imagined, for the King was then not very far distant; but they might still have failed, had it not been for the aid of Merlin. The old wizard met them on the road, and told them that if they hid in the covert close at hand, they would soon see Ryons with some sixty of his knights come riding by. He further repeated the warning the damsel had uttered, namely, that Balin, unless he turned back and threw away his sword, would deal the most dolorous* stroke ever dealt by man, and bring great misery upon himself. But to all this the knight turned a deaf ear.

Acting upon Merlin's advice, Balin and Balan now concealed themselves in the covert, and when

* Sorrowful.

presently King Ryons and his knights came jingling down the forest path, with no suspicion of danger, they dashed out upon them. The King and his little company were taken at such a disadvantage that in a little time forty of the knights had been killed, while the rest fled in disorder, leaving their royal master a prisoner. Ryons having yielded himself, Balin bade him ride on to Arthur's court at Camelot to pay homage to the King, and make amends for his misdeeds.

The two brothers passed through many other adventures, of which there is not space to speak here, and at length parted company. Balin was loth to return to Camelot until he had achieved still greater deeds. He had captured Arthur's enemy and sent him to the King in triumph, but he longed to win more fame. So he rode on alone through different countries, seeking to rescue those who were in peril and to destroy such as did evil.

Eventually Balin came to a castle which stood on a hill, and rode boldly up to the gates to demand admittance. An old man, who was Merlin in disguise, bade him turn back, saying it would be ill for him did he enter the castle, but the knight paid no heed to the warning. He thundered at the portals, and as he did so he heard a horn blow, just as when a stag receives its death wound. Balin's heart misgave him at this, for the old man's words came back to his mind. "That blast is blown for me," he said to himself, "and I am the prize. But I am not dead yet."

Immediately after the horn had sounded the castle gate was raised, and Balin saw a troop of

knights and ladies thronging into the open courtyard. With much courtesy they led him inside, where he was feasted and entertained in a royal manner. At supper the Lady of the Castle told him that there was a knight who lived on an island near by, and who let no man pass without breaking a spear with him.

"Thou must have ado with this knight," she said, "or thou canst not continue thy journey."

"That will I readily," answered Balin, "for it is an evil custom, and to-morrow morn, after I have rested, I will joust with him."

Early the next day Balin got ready for the fight. As he was putting on his armour a knight offered him his shield, which was larger than Balin's, and, little thinking how he would rue this act, he took it in place of his own. Then Balin was rowed across the stream to the island whereon lived the unknown knight.

He had hardly landed when from the castle on the little isle there came riding towards him a big knight whose armour, like the trappings of his horse, was all red. The latter, who was Sir Balan, thought he recognised his brother in this rash intruder on his domain, but, failing to see Balin's well-known shield, he concluded he was mistaken. In a few moments the two had charged upon each other, and now began one of the most fearful fights that have ever been chronicled.

Each knight was overborne in the encounter, and for a brief while, so terrible had been the shock, they lay stunned upon the field. Balan was the first to rise and renew the combat, for Balin was still wearied after his travels. Taking to their

swords they fought fiercely for some hours, dealing such great blows that their armour was well-nigh hacked in pieces, while the wounds they suffered were enough to have caused the death—so the chronicler puts it—"of the mightiest giant in this world."

After they had fought for so long that both were spent of breath, Sir Balan, the younger brother, who was the worse hurt of the two, withdrew to one side and threw himself on the ground. Then Balin cried:

"Who art thou, sir knight? For never found I yet anyone who so withstood me."

"My name is Balan," replied the other, "and I am brother to the noble knight Balin."

"Alas!" exclaimed Balin, "that I should have lived to see this day!" Then, crawling on his hands and knees to his brother's side, he raised the latter's helm and looked into his face.

"Oh, Balan," he said, "I am Balin; woe is me that I have slain thee, as thou also hast slain me."

And his brother moaned: "Oh, Balin, we have killed one another, and men shall mourn for us both."

In this wise they lamented together, the while Balan told of how he had been compelled to keep the island against all who came that way, and Balin recounted how he had come to do battle with him bearing a strange shield. Then, clasped in each other's arms, they died.

The Lady of the Castle, who, with her knights and ladies, had witnessed the fight from afar, had the two brothers buried in a splendid tomb,

on the front of which Merlin inscribed their names and the sad story of their deaths.

As for the wondrous sword with which Balin dealt the dolorous stroke, Merlin put it in a marble stone which floated upon the water for many years until at last it was carried down the stream to Camelot. And here, as you will read later on, it was found by the young knight Sir Galahad, who alone was deemed worthy to bear it.

VI.—OF SIR BREUNOR AND THE ADVENTURE OF THE BLACK SHIELD.

IN an earlier chapter I related the history of the youth whom Sir Kay, the Seneschal, dubbed Beaumains in scorn. There was yet another knight who came to King Arthur's court, and was made the butt of Sir Kay's wit. This is the story of how he, too, went on a perilous quest and proved himself worthy to sit at the Round Table.

One day, while King Arthur was holding his court at Camelot, a tall, well-made youth, richly dressed, made his appearance and asked for an audience. When this was granted he said :

"O King, I have come to you to be made a knight. My name is Breunor, and my father was a most noble lord, so you will do well to grant me this favour."

"Be that as it may," returned Arthur; "but I must know more before I make you knight. Why wear you this great cloak of gold cloth?" he continued, for the other had a richly embroidered coat, which was somewhat too large for him, and ill-shapen, and hung awkwardly from his shoulders.

Then the youth told how the same coat had belonged to his father, who had been treacherously slain one day while asleep. A false knight, his old-time enemy, had stolen upon him unawares and killed him with many great strokes of his sword.

"Which is why the coat sits so badly upon me," concluded Breunor, "for the strokes be on it even as I found it when my father lay dead. And I vowed to wear it until I have revenged his foul death. Now, O King, I pray you again, make me a knight, that I may fare forth on my life-quest."

Some of the older knights of the Round Table, who had listened to the young man's story, now urged the King to grant the request, and Arthur at last promised to make him a knight on the following day.

The next morning, as it happened, King Arthur and a number of his knights rode out a-hunting. Breunor remained at the castle with several others in the company of Queen Guinevere and her ladies. While the young knights and the fair ladies were walking up and down the pleasant terraces a terrible cry of alarm was heard. A large lion that was kept caged in a tower at one end of the castle had managed to break loose, and was making his way towards them.

The fierce animal came leaping on with loud roars, and the Queen and her ladies fled in wild haste. Most of the knights also turned tail and, to their shame, thought only of their own safety. Breunor, with twelve other knights, alone stood in the lion's path to bar its progress. Drawing his sword the youth boldly faced the animal, who, seeing himself challenged, came on at a still greater pace, with gaping jaws. Then Breunor flung his sword high above his head, and, as the lion came within striking reach, brought the weapon down with a mighty sweep that cleft the creature's head in two.



“Breunor flung his sword high above his head.”

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Seeing the lion dead on the ground, all those who had fled from the terrace plucked up courage to come forth again, and word was speedily brought to the Queen that the youth La Cote Male Taile (*i.e.* the knight of the ill-shaped coat), as Sir Kay had at once nicknamed him, had slain the lion. When the King soon afterwards returned, he too was informed of the great danger in which the Queen had been placed, and he gave young Breunor high praise for his courage.

"As I am a king," he said, "you shall prove a most noble and valiant knight, and one of the most worthy to sit with me at the Round Table."

And therewith Arthur dubbed him knight, and called him Sir Breunor. But the young man said: "An it please you, I will be known by no other name than that of 'La Cote Male Taile,' as Sir Kay hath christened me, that my quest may be ever in men's minds."

To this Arthur and the knights of his court readily agreed, and so he was known among them.

Very soon after this event a damsel rode into Camelot, bearing with her a large black shield, on one side of which was painted a hand holding a sword. To the King's questions she answered that she had ridden from a great distance with this shield, which had belonged to a certain doughty knight. The latter had been worsted by another champion, and had committed the shield to her care, bidding her carry it to Arthur's court, and request someone there to take it and fulfil the quest.

When this was made known to the assembled knights there was a great silence awhile, no one

offering to take the shield. At last La Cote Male Taile strode forward, saying: "Fair damsel, I will take this adventure upon me, for I am but this day made knight, and would fain take such a quest upon me."

Then the damsel, having enquired his name, warned him that he would find it no light summer's day adventure, but one full of hard knocks.

"That is all the more to my liking," returned La Cote Male Taile, and very soon afterwards, having donned his armour, he mounted and rode off with his fair companion.

The two had not gone far on their journey when they saw Sir Dagonet, the King's jester, spurring hard after them. "Halt now, young knight," cried the fool; "halt and break a spear with me."

La Cote Male Taile turned and made himself ready, for he knew that this was a piece of Sir Kay's doing, to belittle him in the damsel's eyes. And as Sir Dagonet came at him he smote him so hard that the jester was flung headlong over his horse's neck.

The damsel meanwhile mocked at her champion for jousting with a fool, and said he would be ashamed when they heard of it at Arthur's court. Later on La Cote Male Taile encountered Sir Palamides and several other knights, and was thrown from his horse by each in turn, though they refused to fight with him on foot. These mishaps made the damsel more bitter than before in her railing, and when eventually one, Sir Mordred, joined their company, she would have nothing to do with La Cote Male Taile, but rode with the other.

In due course they came to a famous stronghold known as Castle Orgulous, where it was the custom for every knight who came thither to joust or be made prisoner. As they approached, two knights dashed across the drawbridge against them, with their lances couched. The one who encountered Sir Mordred smote the latter from off his horse, but La Cote Male Taile and his adversary were both unhorsed, whereupon the young knight, jumping upon the other's steed, pursued him into the castle itself, and there slew him.

While La Cote Male Taile stood thus in the courtyard, with the dead knight whom he had vanquished at his feet, a host of other knights gathered round him and sought to take him prisoner. So, getting off his horse, he quickly led the animal through the gateway, and then dashed back, sword in hand, to fight his opponents. He fought desperately against these terrible odds, but it seemed impossible that he could overcome them. At last, as he stood at bay with his back to a wall, a fair lady saw him, and seeing the peril that he was in, she came to a window near and cried:

“O thou brave knight, well as thou fightest thou canst not hope to contend against so many. But if thou canst win thy way to yonder postern,* thou wilt there find thy horse fastened, and thence thou mayest escape.”

On hearing this, La Cote Male Taile gripped his sword more firmly still and flung himself into the press, striking such great blows around him that the knights of the castle were forced to fall back. And so he won his way to the little

* A small back door or gate.

postern, and leaping upon his horse rode away in safety.

The damsel, who had meanwhile held on her way with the discomfited Sir Mordred, quite thought that her despised champion had been killed. Her astonishment was therefore great when, some time later, he came riding in hot haste after them. To his story of the great fight she turned an incredulous ear, averring that the other knights had let him pass unharmed in sheer contempt. But when a messenger whom she despatched to the castle returned telling how La Cote Male Taile had slain nearly a score of the best knights, and how all had deemed him more of a fiend than a man, the damsel hung down her head for very shame, and no more words of chiding passed her lips.

Now when Sir Lancelot of the Lake had come to King Arthur's court and heard how La Cote Male Taile had taken upon himself the adventure of the Black Shield, he was wroth to think that all the knights had allowed one so young to undertake such a perilous mission. For he well knew that the damsel had carried this shield about for a long time, and that it had been fought for by the most valorous knights of the kingdom. Fearing that La Cote Male Taile would be unequal to the task he set himself, Sir Lancelot rode out from Camelot and went in search of him.

On the way he learned something of La Cote Male Taile's adventures, and was glad to hear how well the youth had borne himself; but his heart sank when one day he heard that the young knight and his companions had been taken prisoners at

the castle of Pendragon. Spurring thither in haste, Sir Lancelot challenged the knights of the castle to combat, and as they hurled themselves against him he overthrew them one after another. Having thus become victorious, Sir Lancelot ordered that all the prisoners in the castle should be set free, and among them he found La Cote Male Taile and the damsel.

Together they rode from Pendragon, Sir Lancelot agreeing to continue in their company on one condition, that the damsel should no longer rebuke La Cote Male Taile. "For," he said, "this youth is one of the bravest knights I have known, and for love of him I followed to succour him in this great hour of need."

Then the damsel, turning to both Sir Lancelot and La Cote Male Taile, said that she had really never hated the young knight, but had treated him^o so harshly and cruelly because she loved him, and hoped that by this means she might dissuade him from the quest, which she feared he would never accomplish. At which La Cote Male Taile was exceedingly glad, for he himself loved the damsel, who was the fairest he had ever seen.

The end of La Cote Male Taile's mission was now close at hand. Near the border of the country of Surluse stood a great castle which was held by three brothers, all of them tried knights, famous for their prowess. It was with these that the bearer of the black shield had to wage battle. So, riding boldly up to the gates, La Cote Male Taile challenged the brothers to fight, and therewith began a combat that extorted admiration from Sir Lancelot himself. For many hours did the young knight

fight on horse and foot, receiving many terrible wounds, but not a whit abating the vigour of his strokes. And when he had at length vanquished his adversaries, the castle was delivered into his hands and its prisoners set free.

Later on, when La Cote Male Taile had recovered from his wounds, he, the damsel, and Sir Lancelot set out to return to Camelot, where King Arthur welcomed them with great rejoicing. And now Sir Breunor, or La Cote Male Taile, as he still continued to be called, was given the lordship of great lands by King Arthur, and in time he wedded the damsel for whom he had achieved the adventure of the Black Shield. And, as the chronicles record, he met at last with that false knight who had slain his father, and so avenged himself.

VII.—OF SIR GALAHAD AND THE QUEST FOR THE HOLY GRAIL.

NOT very far from Camelot, where King Arthur was wont to hold his court, stood a grand old abbey. It was a noble-looking pile, with grey stone towers overgrown with ivy and surrounded by green meadows and well-wooded parkland. The Lady Rowena, the abbess, was proud of her home, as well she might be, and proud of its great fame; but her chief joy was in the young boy Galahad, whom she and her nuns had brought up from childhood. They were sure in their own minds that no other youth like him existed in the whole world, so tall and well-made and handsome was he, and so gentle and courteous was his manner.

When at last Galahad reached that age which is on the borderland of manhood, the abbess knew that she ought not to keep him with her any longer. It was high time that he were made a knight and sent forth into the world to play a man's part. And, indeed, the youth was already fretting under the restraint of his present life; he longed to try his wings in the great world outside the abbey gates. So one day a messenger was despatched to Sir Lancelot of the Lake, bidding him come to the abbess without delay.

Sir Lancelot duly obeyed the summons, and on arriving at the abbey found the Lady Rowena and her nuns waiting to receive him, with Galahad in

their midst. When he set eyes on the latter, Sir Lancelot thought he had never seen a fairer-looking youth.

"Sir Lancelot," said the abbess, "this is the boy of whom you have heard as our ward. We have nourished him here since he was a babe, and our chief joy has been in his up-bringing. Now it is his wish to leave us, and as there is none more worthy than you at Arthur's court, we have sent for you to make him a knight."

This Sir Lancelot gladly promised to do, for he foresaw that this same youth, Galahad, was destined for some great deed. So, on the next day, at the Feast of Pentecost, he dubbed him knight. But when he would have carried Galahad off with him to Camelot, the youth refused, saying that he would make his appearance there in good time.

Meanwhile, at Camelot, the King, the Queen, and all the court were observing the festival with due ceremony. After attending the service at the minster, the King assembled his knights at the famous Round Table, where all the sieges (or seats) except one were now filled. The one yet empty was that known as the Siege Perilous, wherein no one had ever ventured to sit. According to tradition, this seat was not to be filled until some four hundred years had elapsed since the death of Christ, and now the precise period assigned had come to an end.

"This very day, then," said Sir Lancelot, "ought this siege to be filled, so that we may expect to see a marvellous adventure."

The King and his court were about to proceed to dinner in the great hall when a squire came

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hurrying in to tell of a wonderful thing that he had just seen. In the river below the castle, he said, was a great stone floating on top of the water, and with a sword sticking in it. This was a marvel in very truth, so King Arthur, followed by all his knights, made his way down to the river side.

There, as the squire had told, they found the stone floating on the water, with a long sword wedged fast in it. The sword was of beautiful workmanship, the pommel being richly chased and set with precious stones. These were so arranged as to form letters, and when they looked closely at it they found that the inscription round the hilt ran thus: "Never shall man take me hence but only he by whose side I ought to hang, and he shall be the best knight in the world."

On reading this, the King commanded the worthiest of his knights to try and pull the sword from its place, but, though many essayed, there was not one who could move it.

Making their way back to the castle again, they all went into the great hall, and Sir Kay, the seneschal, now gave orders for dinner to be served. Hardly, however, had the dishes been laid upon the table when the hall suddenly became dark. The company looked at each other in amazement, wondering what was to follow. Then the door opened and in came an old white-bearded man, with a young knight at his side. The latter, who was on foot, was dressed in red armour, and in place of a sword he wore an empty scabbard which dangled at his side as he walked.

Approaching Arthur's seat, the newcomers made a low obeisance, and then the old man said:

"Sir King, I bring you here a young knight who is of royal lineage, and through whom the marvels of this court and of strange realms shall be achieved."

Arthur welcomed the youth with well-chosen words, after which the old man conducted his companion to the Siege Perilous, and, lifting up the cloth that covered it, showed him an inscription graven thereon in gold letters: "This is the siege of Sir Galahad, the noble prince." Then, taking his leave, the old man departed.

All the knights in the hall were amazed that one so young should dare to seat himself in the Siege Perilous, and, whispering among themselves, they said: "This is surely he who will achieve the finding of the Holy Grail."

Arthur himself was no little astonished, but at the end of the repast he went to where Sir Galahad was sitting, and there saw the young knight's name written. By this he knew that the quest for the Holy Grail, the sacred vessel which contained some of the blood of our Lord, was about to begin. Having made Galahad welcome again, the King took him by the hand and led him from the palace in order to show him the wonder of the floating stone.

Galahad now heard from the King how the knights, one after the other, had tried in vain to pull out the sword. "It is no wonder they failed," he said, "for this adventure is not theirs but mine. And because this sword was meant



"GALAHAD DREW OUT THE SWORD EASILY" (p. 62).

for me did I bring none other with me, only this empty sheath which you see."

Then, stretching forth his hand, Galahad drew out the sword easily from the stone, and placed it in the scabbard.

"Now have I," he said, "the good sword that was once the sword of Balin, the famous knight who slew his brother Balan. And through this did my grandfather, King Pelles, receive a grievous wound, of which he shall not be whole until I heal him."

While he was speaking, a damsel, seated on a white palfrey, came riding towards them. Addressing Arthur, she said: "Sir King, Nacien, the hermit, sendeth word that to thee shall befall the greatest honour that ever befell king in Britain, for this day shall the Holy Grail appear in thy house, and it shall feed thee and all thy fellowship of the Round Table."

Then, turning her palfrey, she rode back in the direction whence she had come without further utterance.

The King was not a little moved at her words, for something told him that his company of knights was soon to be broken up in the quest for the Holy Grail, and that many of them he should never see more. He resolved, therefore, that a great tournament should be held in the meadow of Camelot, wherein every knight should show his prowess. The lists were accordingly at once made ready, and all the fellowship of the Round Table put on their armour and looked to their shields and spears.

The great deeds that were done at this tourney

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are all set down in the old chronicles: how Sir Gawaine, Sir Bors, Sir Lancelot, and many another famous knight broke lances together, and won themselves much glory. Furthermore, of Sir Galahad it is recorded that he overthrew every-one of his adversaries with the exception of two, Sir Lancelot of the Lake and Sir Percival. And at this jousting it was made known that Sir Galahad was the son of Sir Lancelot.

When the tournament was over the whole company wended their way back to the castle to evensong, and afterwards to supper. And now befell the great wonder that the hermit had foretold. For while the King and his knights sat at table it grew dark, and there was heard a great noise of thunder. Then suddenly a sunbeam of dazzling brightness flashed into the hall. Not a knight moved in his place or spoke a word, so full of awe were they all at what they witnessed.

Then gliding down the sunbeam there came the Holy Grail itself, covered over with white samite,* that none might see it. And at the same time, so the chronicle runs, "was the hall filled with good odours, and every knight had such meats and drinks as he best loved in this world: and when the Holy Grail had been borne through the hall, then the holy vessel departed suddenly, that they wist not where it became."

"Now, in sooth," said King Arthur, "ought we to thank our Lord for having showed us such reverence at this high Feast of Pentecost."

"Give thanks, indeed," said Sir Gawaine, rising from his seat, "but one thing remains, that we

* A rich silk stuff, interwoven with gold or embroidered.

did not see the holy vessel, which was so preciously covered. Therefore I do here make a vow that from to-morrow morn I will labour in the quest of the Holy Grail, that I will seek it for a year and a day, or more, if need be, and never will I return to this court until I have beheld it more openly than it hath been seen here."

On hearing Sir Gawaine's vow, nearly all the rest of the Round Table knights rose in their places one after the other and made the same vow. And Arthur's heart sank within him, for now he knew for certain that his goodly fellowship of knights was broken up for ever. For of all those who were to set out on this quest, who but one or two were worthy enough to achieve it? The Queen and her ladies, too, made great ado, as the knights would have to ride forth alone and unattended, and the parting was like to be a long one.

The next day the company of knights who had taken the vow—a hundred and fifty in all—heard service at the minster, after which they rode forth together from the castle and through the streets of Camelot. Sir Galahad rode by the side of Sir Lancelot, his father, until the time came when they should separate, and his heart beat high with hope, for he felt that he was the one chosen to achieve the quest. Of his many adventures on the way, and of how he did indeed see the Holy Grail, we shall read in our next chapter.

VIII.—OF SIR GALAHAD AND HOW HE ACHIEVED THE QUEST OF THE HOLY GRAIL.

Now after Sir Galahad had parted from Sir Lancelot and the other knights who had set out with him on his quest, he rode several days by himself without meeting with any adventure. He was armed, as we have read, with the sword that had once belonged to Balin, but as yet he had no shield. It was not to be long, however, ere he obtained the latter.

One night, arriving at an abbey, he found himself in the company of two other knights of Arthur's court, King Bagdemagus and Sir Uwayne. From them he learnt that within the abbey was a famous shield of great sanctity, which was said to bring death or terrible disaster to all who were bold enough to wear it, save only to him for whom it was intended.

"And to-morrow," said King Bagdemagus, "I shall try to bear it hence, for it is a strange adventure, and for this very same purpose have Sir Uwayne and I journeyed hither."

"Well," said Galahad, "I wish you God-speed, but if it be that ye may not wear this shield, then will I take the adventure upon myself, for I am shieldless, as ye see."

The next day King Bagdemagus made inquiry of the abbot, and was taken to where the shield

hung behind the altar. It was all white except for a large red cross in the centre.

"Sirs," said the old monk who had led the three knights into a chapel, "ye would be well advised to let this be, for this shield should not be borne by anyone save only he who is the worthiest knight in the world. To all others but him it shall bring dire evil!"

Nothing daunted by these words, King Bagdemagus hung the shield on his arm and sallied forth from the abbey, attended by his squire. Galahad and Sir Uwaine remained behind to await his return, or to learn news of how he fared.

King Bagdemagus had not gone far afield before he was challenged by another knight, who bore him down and took the shield from him.

"Sir knight," he said, "you were very foolish to take this adventure upon yourself, for this shield you bear may not be borne except by him who hath no peer in the world." Then, turning to the squire, he added, "Carry this shield to Sir Galahad quickly, for it is he for whom it is destined."

In due course the squire returned to the abbey, having left his master to be attended to at a neighbouring monastery. Galahad took the white shield from him and hung it round his neck. Then, mounting his horse, he bade the squire follow and rode off. At the request of the squire, who was named Melias, Sir Galahad made him a knight, promising that he also should ride in the quest for the Holy Grail.

The two held on their way for a week or so

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before any adventures crossed their path. Then one morning they came to a road which branched off in two directions. At the junction of the ways stood a cross, whereon was written this warning: "All ye knights errant who go to seek adventures, see here these two ways. By the one to the right ye shall not travel, for only he that is a good man and worthy knight may go thither; nor by the other may ye hope to win fame lightly, for ye shall speedily be put to trial."

Sir Melias was hot for an adventure, and on reading the inscription he begged Sir Galahad to let him take the left-hand road that he might have opportunity to prove himself. Galahad reluctantly let him go, and they parted company.

Unfortunately for Sir Melias he fell at the first trial, for meeting a knight who disputed his passage he was overthrown and sore hurt. As he lay in this sad plight, Sir Galahad by good fortune came that way and found him. Sir Melias was then borne to an abbey close by, where he lay for many weeks nigh unto death. In the meantime Galahad continued his journey, for the quest in which he was engaged was ever uppermost in his mind.

It was Galahad's custom to pray to God every day for counsel and guidance in his great undertaking. Not long after he had left his companion he turned aside at a wayside chapel to perform his devotions, and while he was kneeling before the altar he suddenly heard a voice that said:

"Rise, Sir Galahad, and go now to the Castle of Maidens which is near at hand, and there do

away with the wicked custom that you will find."

The young knight was overjoyed on hearing this summons, for here was an adventure to his taste. Mounting once more, he rode down the hill asking his way from all he met.

The castle was well known, for its ill-repute had spread far and wide, and many of those he encountered sought to deter him from journeying thither. But Galahad laughed, and, looking to his arms, spurred his horse boldly to the castle gates. Scarcely had he reined up when seven knights, all brethren, dashed out to meet him.

"Now guard thee, knight," they cried, "for we promise thee naught but death."

"Why, then," returned Galahad, "will ye all set upon me at once?"

"Even so," cried the others, and couching their spears* they charged down upon him.

Then Galahad spurred forward to meet them, and with a mighty thrust of his own lance he sent the foremost of the seven brethren headlong to the ground. The other six fell upon him with their swords and spears, but receiving their blows on his shield the young knight escaped scatheless. Casting aside his lance, Galahad now drew forth his great sword and dashed fiercely at his adversaries.

So quick and strong were his strokes that the knights were forced to give way before him. At last they one and all turned tail and fled, Galahad pursuing them for some distance. At the entrance to the castle an old monk awaited him with the

* Setting their spears in position for attack.



"THE YOUNG KNIGHT . . . AT ONCE OPENED THE GATES" (p. 72).

keys in his hands. The young knight took these and at once opened the gates, to the great joy of all those within, who had been held captive by the seven brethren.

Galahad now learned how the castle had come to gain its evil name. It had formerly belonged to Duke Lianour, the lord of the surrounding country, but the seven brethren had overcome him by treachery and killed him, making his beautiful daughter a prisoner. The maiden had thereupon prophesied that for their wickedness they should not hold the castle many years, for by one knight alone should they all be discomfited. The brethren then vowed that no lady or knight should pass by the castle alive until that knight of whom she spake appeared. And thus the castle had come by its name, for a great number of maidens had fallen into their hands.

With many other adventures did Galahad meet, and in all of them he bore himself as became a brave and valiant knight. Once he encountered his father, Sir Lancelot, and Sir Percival, but they knew him not, for he was in different armour, and they had never seen the shield with the red cross before. And so great was his prowess that even the skilled Sir Lancelot, the victor of a hundred tourneys, went down before him, while Sir Percival received so mighty a stroke that his head was near to being cleft in twain.

Besides adventures such as these, the young knight was assailed from time to time with divers temptations, but through all he passed unharmed, his soul as pure as when he left the

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good Abbess Rowena's care to enter into the great world of men.

Sir Lancelot, Sir Percival, Sir Gawaine, and the rest of the company of Round Table knights who had set out on the search for the Holy Grail, fared equally ill in their enterprise. There was not one who was worthy to achieve the quest; not one but who was stained with sin and unfit to see the sacred vessel.

Sir Lancelot, indeed, came nearest to finding the Holy Grail, for he eventually found himself outside the room wherein it was kept. A voice forbade him to enter, but Lancelot determined to venture in, for which he was stricken down. And for many days and nights he lay as one dead, after which, having recovered his strength, he returned home.

Now, as Galahad was nearing the end of his quest, he fell into the hands of a pagan king; who thrust him and his companions into prison. While they were in this sad case the Holy Grail appeared and fed them, else had they all starved to death. At the end of a year it fell out that the king who had imprisoned them was afflicted with a grave illness and lay upon his deathbed. Remembering the knights whom he had made captive, he sent for them and begged their forgiveness. Almost immediately after he died, whereupon the city was in great dismay, for he had left no successor.

While the counsellors and others were discussing the question of who should be the next king, a voice was heard bidding them choose the youngest knight of the three strangers in their

midst, for he was best fitted to rule over them. Accordingly Sir Galahad was elected king, and for a time he abode in that country.

Then one day, about a year after he had commenced his reign, a holy man appeared to the young king and called to him, saying:

"Come forth, Galahad, thou servant of Christ, for now shalt thou see that which thou hast so long desired. Lo, I am Joseph of Arimathea, and I am come to show you the perfect Vision of the Holy Grail."

Then Sir Galahad with his companions saw for a brief moment the holy vessel in a glorious radiance of light, and received the sacrament. After this he bade farewell to Sir Percival and Sir Bors, and suddenly, as he knelt at prayer before the altar, his soul was lifted up to heaven, and a great multitude of angels appeared. At the same instant a hand reached down and, laying hold of the sacred vessel, bore it away. Joseph of Arimathea, too, had disappeared, and there were none left but Sir Percival and Sir Bors to marvel at the vision. Sir Galahad still knelt at the altar in the attitude of prayer, but when they went to him they found that he was dead. And since then, as the old chronicle concludes, "there was never man so hardy as to say that he had seen the Holy Grail."

IX.—OF THE JEST OF SIR DAGONET.

IN a former chapter I told of how Sir Tristram of Lyonesse went to Ireland and fell in love with La Belle Ysolde. On his return home to Cornwall, he told his uncle, King Mark, of this beautiful Irish princess; whereupon the king resolved to wed her. So off went Tristram again to Ireland to demand La Belle Ysolde's hand for his uncle, and, after many adventures, he brought her safely back with him.

Now, although King Mark had gained his desire through Tristram's prowess, he bore the youth no goodwill. He was jealous of his nephew's fame, which was ever growing greater, and at last he drove him out of Cornwall. La Belle Ysolde, too, was at little pains to disguise her affection for the gallant young knight, and what with one thing and another, King Mark eventually thought it best to have Sir Tristram slain. Accordingly, with two knights of his court and two squires, he set out for that part of England where Tristram then was.

While on the road King Mark heard further news of his nephew, which made him more jealous and more angry still. He learned that Tristram had done such doughty deeds as caused him to be regarded as a knight second only to Sir Lancelot in fame, that he was then at Arthur's court at Camelot, and that the king held him in the highest esteem.

Stories of King Arthur

When this was told to King Mark, he took his two followers aside and bade them swear that they would help him to kill Tristram. This, however, they stoutly refused to do, and in his anger the king suddenly drew his sword and slew one of them on the spot. He would have killed the other knight as well, had not the squires come to the rescue and held him at bay. This knight, Sir Amant, now left the king's company, for he would not be concerned in such a shameful quest, and King Mark was left to continue his journey alone.

As he rode along the way to Camelot, devising by what means he could compass Tristram's death, the wicked king fell in with two noble knights, Sir Lamorak de Galis and Sir Dinadan. Both these knights knew him to be from Cornwall, though they were unaware of his real name, and they did not fail to rebuke him for being, as they supposed, in King Mark's service.

"All the world," said Sir Lamorak, "knows that King Mark is as false and cowardly a knight as ever lived, and it is a thousand pities that he should be wedded to so fair a lady as La Belle Ysolde."

"'Tis so, in truth," added Sir Dinadan, "and it were shame for any knight of Arthur's court to be seen in company of so villainous a king!"

Finding himself held in such contempt, King Mark was in no hurry to reveal his identity, but it was not long before he was recognised.

As the three journeyed on together, they came to a castle, the lord of which was Sir Tor. This Sir Tor, as you may remember, was

King Pellinore's son, whom Arthur had knighted. When they rode into the courtyard, Sir Tor and his knights welcomed them gladly, but as soon as the lieutenant of the castle, Sir Berluse by name, saw the king, he said to him:

"I know you, King Mark, for all that you are riding in the company of these good knights, and with a strange shield. You are he that slew my father traitorously, and you would have killed me, too, had I not by good hap escaped. You are a wicked knight, and a murderer to boot. In this castle, as Sir Tor's guest, you shall be safe, but when you leave us, look to it that I do not slay you in turn!"

Sir Lamorak and Sir Dinadan were now greatly disconcerted to hear who their companion was, but inasmuch as they had promised to conduct the king to Arthur's court they would not desert him.

In the morning, Sir Dinadan and King Mark rode off together, and they had not gone many miles ere Sir Berluse with two other knights came riding towards them. Sir Berluse was bent on revenging himself, but with Sir Dinadan's help King Mark kept him off. Not very long afterwards, Sir Dinadan encountered the great Sir Tor himself, and was unhorsed, upon which the Cornish king began to mock him.

"I thought all you knights of Arthur's court could never find your match," he said laughingly, "and yet here you are overthrown at the first encounter with this knight!"

To his taunts Sir Dinadan made little reply,

for he despised King Mark too much to wish to hold converse with him. He would be glad, he thought, for any chance that would rid him of the other's company; and the next day, as it happened, his desire was gratified. For, while they rode on together, Sir Dinadan spied a party of six knights coming across the plain, and by their shields he knew them to belong to the Round Table fellowship. So he called to King Mark to follow him and joust with these knights. But the king held back.

"They are six," he exclaimed, "while we are but two; heaven forbid that we should encounter them!"

"Be they as many as twelve," replied Sir Dinadan, "it behoves us to meet them." And spurring on his horse, he rode towards them.

But as fast as he galloped one way, King Mark galloped the other, turning tail like the coward he was. And he was in such a haste to get away that he did not see how Sir Dinadan took his spear out of the rest, flung his shield over his shoulder, and was welcomed by the six knights as a friend.

When at nightfall Sir Dinadan and the other Round Table knights made their way to a castle near at hand to find lodging, the former was surprised to discover that King Mark had preceded him thither. To frighten the cowardly king, Sir Dinadan now told him that his new-found companions were knights of Arthur's court, and that their leader was none other than the famous Sir Lancelot of the Lake. This was not the truth, as a matter of fact, for Sir Lancelot was at the time

away on another quest, but Sir Dinadan had it in his mind to play a joke upon the other.

"You will know Sir Lancelot by the shield he carries," he said; "it is of silver with black bars."

Now, in the company of the Round Table knights was King Arthur's fool, Sir Dagonet, and it was Sir Dinadan's idea to get the jester to personate Sir Lancelot, and challenge King Mark to a jousting. As it was Sir Mordred's shield which was of silver and bore black bars, this was given to Sir Dagonet, together with the rest of the knight's harness, and in the morning he was armed and mounted on a big charger.

The jester entered into the joke with great zest, vowing that he would strike terror into the heart of King Mark as surely as if he were really Sir Lancelot. There was a wood near by, and here the party hid themselves while Sir Dagonet on his horse pranced about the roadway, waiting until King Mark should come in sight.

When at length the king did appear, Sir Dagonet drove his spurs into the great horse, waved his spear on high, and, crying out to the king to mind himself, bore down upon him like a whirlwind. But as soon as King Mark saw the silver shield, he said:

"'Tis Sir Lancelot who challenges me, for a certainty; now indeed am I undone! I were as good as dead did I break spears with him!"

And once more showing the white feather, he turned his horse and made off as speedily as he could.

This was no more than the others had expected. With much laughter they now sprang

on to their horses, and followed after Sir Dagonet, who was chasing King Mark with loud cries. The latter sought refuge in a forest, in which he hoped to shake off pursuit, but the fool kept close to his heels.

As chance would have it, a strange knight who met King Mark flying, befriended him, and himself awaited Dagonet's onslaught. The result was that the unlucky jester was overthrown, and things might have gone hard with him had not his friends come up soon afterwards. With their arrival on the scene the secret was out, and, as you may suppose, King Mark was heartily ashamed to find how he had been played with.

Later on, as the chronicle faithfully recounts, King Mark did meet Sir Lancelot, but at the very mention of the latter's name he threw himself on the ground, whining for mercy and refusing to fight. Then Sir Lancelot took him back to Arthur's court at Camelot, where his numerous misdeeds were told to the king. And in due course punishment was meted out to him; but all that is another story in itself.

X.—OF THE QUEEN'S MAYING, AND HOW SIR LANCELOT RODE IN A CART.

EARLY one morning in May, Queen Guinevere called her knights round her and bade them be ready to go a-maying with her and her ladies in the woods and meadows near Westminster. As a rule, when she rode abroad, the Queen was always attended by a large retinue, among whom were a number of untried youths who were known as the Queen's knights. These had not yet taken part in any tournament or battle, and they carried plain white shields to distinguish them from the other knights of Arthur's court. When, at the end of a year, any knights of the Order of the Round Table had died, their places were filled by the worthiest among the Queen's knights. And in this way had Sir Lancelot and many others won their spurs.

On this occasion Queen Guinevere would only take ten of her knights with her, these including Sir Kay, Sir Agravaine, Sir Persant, and Sir Pelleas. They were all clad in green, like foresters, and they rode forth merry and light-hearted into the fields, with never a thought of treachery in the air. But a wicked knight named Sir Meliagrance, whose castle was near by, saw them as they went a-maying, and because he loved Queen Guinevere he made a plan to capture her. Accordingly, with a company

of men-at-arms and archers, he lay in wait for them in the wood.

The Queen and her gay party, all decked with wreaths of flowers and ferns, and making the air ring with their laughter, presently came riding by. Then out sprang Sir Meliagrance and his followers, barring the way.

"What meaneth this?" cried Queen Guinevere in surprise, while her knights closed up behind her.

"It meaneth that thou must yield thyself prisoner to me," answered Meliagrance. "All these years have I loved thee in vain, and now chance has thrown thee into my power. Thou canst not hope to escape."

"Traitor knight," said Queen Guinevere, "wilt thou bring shame upon thyself and me? Remember how thou art a king's son and a knight of the Round Table; wherefore let me return in safety."

But nothing she could say would move Meliagrance from his purpose. "Ye must yield yourselves," he repeated, "for I mean to carry you all off to my castle."

The ten Queen's knights, who were unarmed save for their swords, now ranged themselves in front of their royal mistress, but they were powerless to withstand the onslaught of Meliagrance and his knights. After a desperate struggle, in which they acquitted themselves manfully, all but four were smitten to the ground. Seeing her brave defenders in such bad case, Queen Guinevere begged Sir Meliagrance to cease the combat, declaring that she would accompany him

to his castle on condition that the four knights left to her also went thither.

To this Meliagrance assented, so after the wounded men had had their hurts seen to, the whole party set off.

Sir Meliagrance, who was sore afraid lest news of his ill-doing should reach Arthur's court, forbade any of the Queen's company to leave her, and kept a close watch upon them. Guinevere, however, determined to outwit him. In a little time, she managed to give a message to one of her young squires, and ordered him to seize his opportunity and ride fast to Westminster, where he would find Sir Lancelot of the Lake.

"Give him this ring I give thee," she said, "and pray him, as he loveth me, to come to my rescue. Ride hard and spare not thy horse, neither for water nor for land."

The squire soon after saw a chance to escape, and, putting spurs to his horse, dashed off. Sir Meliagrance's horsemen endeavoured to recapture him, and his archers sent arrow after arrow in the direction of the flying messenger, but he quickly outdistanced them. Seeing this, the wicked knight made all haste to reach his castle, for he knew well enough that Sir Lancelot would not be long in answering the Queen's message. On the way, he laid an ambush for Sir Lancelot, hiding some thirty or more of his most skilled archers in the wood, and giving them instructions to look out for a knight on a white horse and stay him at all costs.

When the young squire arrived almost breathless at Sir Lancelot's lodging in Westminster and

delivered his message, you can imagine with what wrath the knight listened to his tale.

"Bring me my armour," he thundered, "and see that my horse be made ready instantly. O that I had been there, well armed, to save the Queen from this villainous traitor! But though he hath a thousand knights around him he shall not hold the Queen prisoner while I am a living man!"

Then, leaving the squire behind with a message for one Sir Lavaine, who was to follow after him, Sir Lancelot rode off post-haste for Sir Meliagrance's castle. He clattered down the main street, made his horse swim across the river, and followed the same path that Queen Guinevere had taken when she started out that morning to go a-maying. The birds sang in the trees just as merrily, and the flowers bloomed as brightly on the green hedgerows and banks, but Sir Lancelot heeded them not. He only thought of the Queen captive in the gloomy castle in the wood, with only a few of her attendants to serve her, and his brow darkened as he gripped his sword more firmly.

In due time the knight came to the spot where Sir Meliagrance had placed his men in ambush. At the sight of the body of archers who confronted him with drawn bows he reined up his steed.

"I command ye to let me pass," cried Sir Lancelot angrily. "By what right do ye bid me, who am a knight of the Round Table, to leave my way?"

To this the archers answered nothing, save that he must turn back, or else go on foot, for

they had been ordered, if he opposed them, to kill his horse.

"Be that as it may," said Sir Lancelot; "it will serve ye little good. Ye may slay my horse, but as for myself, I care not for you were you five hundred instead of thirty. Out of my way, I tell you, or stay me at your peril!"

The brave knight spurred his horse towards them, but in a few moments the animal fell wounded under the shower of arrows, and Sir Lancelot was unhorsed. Sword in hand, he now endeavoured to get at his enemies, but by leaping over the hedges and ditches where he could not follow, burdened as he was with armour, they easily avoided him. Finding himself so much at a disadvantage, he continued his way on foot, more determined than ever that Sir Meliagrance should pay dearly for his treachery.

While making his way through the wood, Sir Lancelot suddenly came upon a woodcutter's cart with two men.

"Here is good fortune!" he exclaimed, addressing one of them. "Fellow, what wilt thou take to carry me to yonder castle on the hill?"

"I will take nothing," answered the woodcutter surlily; "nor will I carry thee anywhere. I am here to fetch wood for my lord Sir Meliagrance, and I will serve none other."

"But it is with him that I wish to speak," said Sir Lancelot.

"That is no matter," returned the man, as surly as before; "thou dost not ride with me, and there's an end on't."

"Very well, then," said the knight, "take that for thy churlishness." And he gave him such a blow that the man fell to the ground dead. "Now, you," he continued, addressing the other woodman, "jump into this cart at once, and drive me at thy best speed to thy master's gate, or it shall go as hard with thee as with thy fellow!"

The other woodcutter was for running away, but Sir Lancelot caught him by the arm, and in fear and trembling the man climbed up and took the reins. Then, having whipped up his horse to a gallop, he and the knight lumbered off along the forest track.

About half an hour afterwards, while Queen Guinevere and her ladies were anxiously looking out from a window in the castle, in the hope of seeing Sir Lancelot riding towards them, they suddenly saw a strange sight. A rough woodcutter's cart was rattling over the road in the valley beneath them, and in it was a tall knight, fully armed.

"See, madam," said one of the ladies, "there is a sad sight! Surely it is some knight who hath done evil and is now riding to his hanging."

"Even so it seems," answered the Queen, but when the cart came nearer and she looked again, she recognised by his shield that it was Sir Lancelot.

"Ah, 'well is he that hath a trusty friend,'" she said to herself. "I knew thou wouldst not fail me, my Lancelot. Now have I no fear for what Sir Meliagrance may purpose doing."

As soon as the cart had reached the castle gates,

Sir Lancelot sprang down and forced his way in past the porter.

"Now, come forth, thou traitorous knight," he cried, as he stood in the courtyard. "Come forth, thou and all thy fellowship; for here stand I, Sir Lancelot of the Lake, to fight with thee!"

Sir Meliagrance, hearing this summons, ran in great fear to the chamber where Queen Guinevere was seated, and falling on his knees before her, begged forgiveness for the wrong he had done.

"I throw myself on thy grace," he cried; "pray intercede with Sir Lancelot for me, and to-morrow thou and all thy company shall return safely with him to Westminster. I am indeed woeful that I should have done this thing."

"Thou little deservest mercy," answered the Queen, "but I will speak for thee. Better is peace than ever war, and the less my name is noised about the better is it for my honour."

So saying, she went down into the courtyard, where Sir Lancelot was still raging up and down, calling upon the traitor knight to come forth. He was resolved to kill Sir Meliagrance, but at the Queen's earnest entreaties he went within peaceably, and laid his arms aside. And so, in due course, Queen Guinevere and her knights and ladies returned to King Arthur's court, well satisfied at this happy ending to their adventure.

As for Sir Meliagrance, that wicked knight, for all his seeming repentance, was still treacherously minded. Although he had agreed to meet Sir Lancelot some days later, and fight with him, he laid a trap for the Queen's champion

while they were in the castle, and thrust him into a deep dungeon. By great good fortune Sir Lancelot escaped just in time to appear on the field of battle, and here, before the King and Queen, he slew Sir Meliagrance.

XI.—OF THE SWORD EXCALIBUR, AND THE PASSING OF ARTHUR.

KING ARTHUR'S sword, as I have already told you, was called Excalibur, which means "Cut steel." It was a very fine weapon, and possessed such magic properties that its owner bore a charmed life wherever he carried it. The way that it came into Arthur's hands was as follows.

Not long after the King had come to the throne, while he was riding abroad like any young knight of his court in search of adventure, he fell under the spell of a sorceress. Although she kept him prisoner in her castle, however, she could not make him break his knightly vows and, finding her spells were of no avail against him, she let him go free. On leaving her castle, Arthur, by the sorceress's enchantment, though he knew it not, followed a path which led him to a certain fountain. Here abode a knight named Sir Pellinore, who had not his equal for strength and skill at that time.

It was Sir Pellinore's custom to make any knight who passed that way joust with him. Seeing Arthur approach, he bade him prepare to fight. The young King was unarmed, save for his sword, but Sir Pellinore gave him a spear, and they made ready for the encounter.

After they had fought for some time on foot, the King having been unhorsed at the first shock, Pellinore gained the advantage. Arthur's sword

broke off at the hilt, and in the hand to hand struggle which followed he was overcome and lay at the other's mercy. Seeing the King's danger, Merlin, who was ever at hand to watch over him, by his magic caused a deep sleep to come upon Pellinore, so that he fell to the ground as if dead.

Arthur's wounds required to be attended to, and he would have returned to the court at once as Merlin desired, but he was reluctant to go back weaponless.

"That is easily remedied," said the wizard. "Come with me and I will take thee to where thou shalt find a sword, the most wonderful one in the world."

The young King followed Merlin through the forest until they came in sight of a mere. As his eye fell upon the water, Arthur saw an arm, clothed in white samite,* stretched above the surface of the lake, holding in its hand a gleaming sword.

"Lo," said Merlin to the wondering King, "yonder is the sword of which I spake." Then, as a small skiff with a damsel in it shot out from the reedy bank, he added: "That is the Lady of the Lake thou seest. Beneath this mere she hath a palace hidden in a great rock, and as she hath magic power she hath wrought this sword for thee. Speak well to her, sir king, for thou mayest have need of her in time to come."

When the Lady of the Lake came to the water's edge where they were standing, Arthur begged her to give him the sword, and this she promised to do if he would in return grant her a gift when she

* See footnote on page 63.

should ask for one. The King readily agreed to this condition, and rowing out immediately to where the arm was uplifted above the water he took the sword, after which the arm disappeared below the surface.

On drawing the sword from its beautiful scabbard Arthur found some mystical writing on both sides of it, which Merlin interpreted for him.

“On one side,” said the old wizard, “it readeth: ‘Keep me,’ and on the other: ‘Throw me away.’ The time is not yet come when thou must obey this second behest, therefore wear it by thy side, O king. This is the good brand Excalibur, or ‘Cut steel,’ the best sword that man ever had.”

Further, Merlin told him how as long as he wore the scabbard he would never be in danger of death, and he warned him not to let it pass out of his possession. Arthur faithfully followed these instructions, and it was only through the treachery of a queen named Morgan le Fay, who stole the sword and scabbard from him, that he was ever in peril for his life.

All through the many wars that King Arthur waged, both in Britain and in foreign countries, did he carry his good sword Excalibur, and by its aid he achieved great deeds of valour. His chief aim was to put himself on the side of the oppressed, to redress any wrongs that remained unrighted; and to this end, as we know, he formed the company of knights known as the Round Table. Each of these was bound to his service by a vow of chivalry, that called on him to succour anyone who was in distress. All the knights of the Round

Table were not so noble and pure in heart as the King, but most of them tried to live up to the high ideal he set them and prove themselves true followers of Christ.

After King Arthur had reigned wisely over his people for many years, and had restored peace to the troubled land, a rebellion broke out which threatened to undo all his good work. While he had gone for a time to France to fight against Sir Lancelot with whom he had quarrelled, the King had left his nephew, Sir Mordred, in charge of the kingdom. This Mordred was a traitor, and in Arthur's absence he plotted to seize the crown for himself. The King heard of this in due course, and returning from France he assembled a large army to meet that of Mordred, and drive out the usurper.

For a time King Arthur carried everything before him, defeating Mordred, and winning back to his side many great lords who had deserted him. At length, however, Mordred withdrew into the west country, where he strengthened his forces by calling to his aid some of the heathen hosts whom Arthur had been at such pains to drive from the land. In the Welsh mountains he felt more secure, and it was here that the last great stand was made.

All day long the battle raged, Arthur and his knights bearing themselves bravely wherever the fight was thickest. As his enemies weakened and fell before him, the King sought to find Mordred himself and bring the traitor to his doom. He was now guarded by only two of his valiant knights, Sir Lucan and Sir Bedivere; all the

rest had perished in the fight. Bearing down at last upon his treacherous nephew, Arthur struck him down with his spear, but Mordred, knowing that he had received his death-wound, made a last desperate effort and, reaching the King, dealt him a fatal blow upon the head.

King Arthur sank to the ground in a swoon at the same moment that Mordred fell back dead. Then Sir Lucan and Sir Bedivere carried the wounded King tenderly to a little chapel by the sea-shore, where no sooner had they arrived than Sir Lucan, who had been sorely hurt in the battle, also died. This left Sir Bedivere the sole guardian of the King.

When Arthur awoke from his swoon and saw that he was alone, save for the one knight left to him, he knew that the end of all was at hand. The great company of the Round Table which he had formed was broken up, and thenceforth there would be no knights to carry out his laws and maintain the wise and peaceful government he had instituted. Very sorrowfully the King looked upon his sword, for the time had now come when he must part with it.

After he had spoken to Sir Bedivere of the days of trouble which were to follow upon his death, Arthur bade him take up Excalibur and carry it to the mere close by whence the sword had first come. There he was to cast it into the water and tell the King of what happened. Bedivere, promising to obey the command, accordingly departed; but on the way he was loth to part with such a splendid sword, all jewelled as it was in the hilt, and hiding the

weapon by the edge of the lake he hastened back to the dying King.

Lord Tennyson, who has written a beautiful poem on this subject, tells how when Arthur questioned Sir Bedivere as to the result of his errand the knight answered only:

“I heard the ripple washing in the reeds,
And the wild water lapping on the crag.”

The King was angry at these words, for he knew that Bedivere had played him false. “Go again,” he commanded, “and cast the sword into the mere as I bade thee. Then watch, and bring me word of what thou seest.”

Sir Bedivere went a second time to the lake's edge, but once more his heart failed him; he could not bring himself to throw away the sword. Hiding Excalibur again he strode back to the King with the same answer that he had given before.

Then was Arthur still more wroth. “O miserable, untrue knight!” he exclaimed. “That thou, the last of my company, shouldst have twice betrayed me! Thou hast been dazzled by the splendour of the gems; yet once more will I try thee. Go, therefore, a third time to the mere, and if thou failest me now, I will arise and slay thee with mine own hands!”

Quickly leaving the dying King, Sir Bedivere hastened to the spot where Excalibur lay concealed among the reeds and rushes, and, closing his eyes that he might not yield to temptation again, he swung the sword round his head and

flung it far from him into the lake. Then, as he watched, he saw a wonderful sight. As the sword touched the water an arm, clothed in white samite, suddenly rose from the surface, clutched it by the hilt, and having brandished it three times vanished with it beneath.

This marvellous event Sir Bedivere told the King on his return, and Arthur knew that the knight had fulfilled his promise.

“My end draws near,” now said the King; “I pray thee bear me to the water’s edge. I am fain to be gone, for my wound hath taken cold, and I am like to die.”

Sir Bedivere supported him to the sea-shore, where there suddenly appeared a great barge in which stood three queens, robed in black and wearing gold crowns upon their heads. These queens received Arthur into the barge with tears and lamentations, after which it moved slowly away from land.

Left alone on the brink Sir Bedivere cried out to the King not to go without taking him, for he cared not to go back into the world companionless among strange faces. But Arthur answered that it could not be, and bade him devote the rest of his life to prayer. For himself, he said, he was going to the island valley of Avilion, there to be healed of his grievous wound.

In a little while the barge, moved by oar and sail, floated away out of Sir Bedivere’s sight, and the knight turned sadly from the shore. Obeying Arthur’s wish he soon after entered a hermitage, where he remained engaged in holy exercises until his death. Sir Lancelot, also, like many another

good knight, in due time relinquished his sword for the monk's cell, and spent the rest of his days as a true servant of God.

As for King Arthur, he died, and was buried in the West country. Many of the people, however, refused to believe this, and there is a legend that he did not die of his wound, but that he still lives in the beautiful valley of Avilion, ready to come forth to his country's aid should she ever need him.

THE END

CENTRAL CIRCULATION
CHILDREN'S ROOM



